



Should Scotland Secede from the United Kingdom?

Who knows, but why is it Barack Obama's business?

By [Doug Bandow](#)

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The vote over Scottish independence is coming down to the wire. Polls show a close race. It is a momentous decision that would reverse the Act of Union adopted back in 1707, but why is President Barack Obama bothering the Scots with his opinion?

A Scottish yes vote would have dramatic effects. While independence activists have reassured their countrymen that nothing much would change, a Scottish nation might find a less than warm welcome from European and other world leaders. No doubt, Holyrood (parliament) would receive diplomatic recognition. But Scotland's passage to nationhood might not be as easy as promised.

An independent Scotland likely would have to reapply to the European Union and NATO. Holyrood would have to create its own currency, or unofficially use the British pound, over which the Scots would have no control. The new nation would have to decide whether it even wanted a military; the British nuclear deterrent would have to move south to a base that today doesn't exist.

Until recently virtually everyone outside of Scotland believed that the Scots would deliver a solid no vote. After all, their economy is weak and they are dependent on subsidies from London. And what would be gained from going it alone? Scotland has a venerable heritage, but a small population, 5.3 million. Holyrood already enjoys extensive self-rule, instituted in 1999, and is governed by the Scottish National Party, which won a majority in 2011. The main beneficiaries of independence would be the new nation's political elite, which would be catapulted onto the international stage.

But the desire for independence and self-rule go back to the beginning of human history. People want to rule themselves, even if others theoretically could do a better job. Although Prime Minister Gordon Brown was a Scot, many in the UK's north feel disenfranchised. Scotland is overwhelmingly for Labour—it sent only one Tory MP to Westminster in the last election—and feels little connection to Conservative governments. More fundamentally, many Scots reject the more vibrant market system that characterizes the UK as well as U.S. Left alone, the new nation

would choose something closer to the sort of social democracy tried (and mostly discarded) elsewhere in Europe.

It's hard to say how much different life would be. But there's no doubt the Scots could create their own country. There are plenty of nations that have less territory, smaller populations, fewer resources, and smaller economies. The Scots could reasonably believe that they would be better off on their own.

The tightening race has created panic in Westminster. National leaders fear losing a third of their territory and eight percent of their population. Other peoples have gone to war over less. To his credit, Prime Minister David Cameron is no Abraham Lincoln: in the event of secession, there would be no invasion, no people killed to prevent them from going their own way. In recent years Czechoslovakia allowed Slovakia to break off. Serbia accepted Montenegro's departure.

The Cameron government has countered by promising to return more authority to the Scottish assembly. In 2012 the Cameron government refused to allow a second ballot question asking whether voters would accept further devolution. Now the three largest national parties are promising to pass along additional powers to the Scottish assembly—though they can't agree on how much and which powers.

Brown, who lost the last election, talked of turning over economic and social policy, including finance and welfare, which would move "us as close to federalism as we can." Although Britain's government long has been overly centralized, the rush to toss national authority overboard raises the question: What is Westminster hoping to preserve? If the Scots are so unhappy with the present system that they are inclined to leave, why not accept the result with grace? In fact, Conservatives might celebrate the departure of 40 Scottish Labour MPs, which would make it much harder for the latter party to again form a government. Even a narrow win in which almost half of voters say they wanted to leave might prove Pyrrhic. It would leave a barely united United Kingdom, one likely to face continuing Scottish dissatisfaction and future secession votes.

However, the decision is up to the Scots. I lived in England while in high school and visited Scotland with my parents. The latter land was delightful and I have no opinion about with whom, if anyone, it should be joined. The same could be said of Wales and Northern Ireland, which are not—presently, anyway—pressing for separation.

While it isn't an issue on which I have much to say, or anyone in Scotland would care what I had to say, that isn't true for more than a few other foreigners. A comical cavalcade of outsiders has been telling the Scottish what to do.

For instance, Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott said "... it's hard to see how the world would be helped by an independent Scotland." He added, "I think that the people who would like to see the break-up of the United Kingdom are not the friends of justice, the friends of freedom, and the countries that would cheer at the prospect... are not the countries whose company one would like to keep." As if to prove him wrong, Russian President Vladimir Putin observed: "one

should not forget that being part of a single strong state has some advantages.” Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang endorsed a “strong, prosperous and united United Kingdom.”

India’s foreign minister, Sushma Swaraj, answered a question about the upcoming vote: “God forbid!” Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper urged the Scots to follow the example of Quebec, which rejected proposals to secede. Even Pope Francis observed that “all division worried him,” though he acknowledged that it would be right in some circumstances.

Naturally, President Barack Obama felt the need to offer his opinion. In June he declared: “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it,” meaning the UK, which he said appeared to have “worked pretty well.” But his focus was on the impact on the U.S.: “the United Kingdom has been an extraordinary partner for us.” Moreover, “we obviously have a deep interest in making sure that one of the closest allies that we will ever have remains strong, robust, united and an effective partner.”

President Obama didn’t stop there. He also told the United Kingdom that it should remain in the European Union. Opined the president: “With respect to the EU, we share a strategic vision with Great Britain on a whole range of international issues and so it’s always encouraging for us to know that Great Britain has a seat at the table in the larger European project.” He also found it hard “to imagine that it would be advantageous for Great Britain to be excluded from political decisions that have an enormous impact on its economic and political life.”

The president is not the only America expressing such sentiment. Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton cited the “special relationship” between the U.S. and UK: “I would hate to have you lose Scotland.” Left-wing *New York Times* columnist Paul Krugman criticized the campaign for independence.

Rep. Brad Sherman (D-Ca.) argued: “It’s clear from this side of the Atlantic that a United Kingdom, including Scotland, would be the strongest possible American ally.” He was joined by 26 colleagues in introducing a resolution declaring “that the House of Representatives believes that a united, secure, and prosperous United Kingdom is important for U.S. national security priorities in Europe and around the world.”

While Westminster, which apparently requested the president to intervene, might find these arguments convincing, not so the Scottish public. One irreverent Scot tweeted: “I take it he tells Americans not to celebrate Independence Day.” Scottish comedian Bruce Fummey said, “Barack Obama coming over here and telling us they can have independence from London, but we can’t. Well, nobody in Scotland gives a f**k what Barack Obama thinks about independence.”

Indeed, there’s one very good reason for Scots to vote yes on independence: to tell the rest of the world “up yours!” Scotland’s first minister, Alex Salmond, who is running the yes campaign, observed that “I don’t know if Hillary or the president of the United States are familiar with the Scottish word *thrawn*. It doesn’t mean stubborn, it basically means Scots don’t like being told what to do.” He added: “Being told what to do tends to instigate a position in Scotland where we will say we will choose our own way forward.”

Scotland played a role in America's independence struggle. The freedom ideas of the Scottish Enlightenment crossed the Atlantic to Britain's colonies in North America. Adam Smith was one of history's great proponents of liberty. One Scottish independence activist told NBC News: "Americans went through their own struggle for independence 200 years ago and it turned out pretty well for them. They were the pioneers of this process! You would expect America to look out for what's in its own best interests and there's no reason why Scotland shouldn't be exactly the same."

Indeed.

Scotland has the right to chart its own course. Whatever the Scots choose on September 18, Americans should wish them well.

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